

Obituaries



A 1972 Photograph Bruce Knight

M. ROFHEART

Martha Rofheart, an accomplished actress who later turned to writing and made a splash with her best-selling first novel, died at New York University Medical Center on Tuesday. She was 73, and had been ill for six months with a respiratory ailment.

Mrs. Rofheart began coming to Amagansett more than 25 years ago. She spent weekends and summers in an Oak Lane house she and her husband, Ralph B. Rofheart, bought, and her social life here mixed easily with her rise as a novelist. Her agent, who was among her circle of friends, lived in Springs.

When she was still a young woman in her native Louisville, Ky., Martha Jones began a precocious and gutsy dash for the stage. She was graduated from high school at 15, and after two years studying drama at the University of Cincinnati she wrote to Lynn Fontanne asking for an audition. The legendary actress and her husband, Alfred Lunt, were beginning a repertory company. The 17-year-old never looked back.

Becoming a protegee of Miss Fontanne, the actress appeared on Broadway with the Lunts in "The Pirate," and in several dramas with Helen Hayes, among them "Dream Girl" and "Harriet." In World War II she toured American hospitals with the USO.

Mrs. Rofheart's lynx-like beauty became familiar to television viewers in the 1950s, when she appeared in "Playhouse 90" dramas, but her writing

was to bring her the greatest success. Appropriately, her first book, "Fortune Made His Sword," was somewhat inspired by Laurence Olivier's performances of "Henry V" at the Old Vic.

The 445-page historical novel was about the rollicking life and times of Henry himself, seen through several different viewpoints. G.P. Putnam's Sons published it in 1972. It found wide favor with buyers and reviewers, and it also set the author off on a novel-writing binge. She came close to producing a new book each year for the next six years.

Reviewing the book for The New York Times, Granville Hicks, a critic and historian, praised the first work. He wrote, "Her prose is clean and lively, free from the archaisms that were once thought essential to historical fiction, and equally free from the clichés that bespatter most best-sellers, whether they deal with the present or the past." The novel became a Book-of-the-Month Club pick.

Some of the author's talent for clean prose came from part-time copywriting at her husband's advertising agency, which handled mostly fashion accounts. She began working with him after leaving the stage and rearing their only son, Evan, who lives in the Oak Lane house.

The novels by Mrs. Rofheart that followed were "Glendower Country," "My Name Is Sappho," which Publishers Weekly noted moved "with an enchanting cadence through the years and places and tales of the pre-classical Greek world," "The Alexandrian," about the loves of Cleopatra, "The Savage Brood," and, in 1981, "Lionheart."

Throughout her literary career, Mrs. Rofheart's agent and adviser was the late John Schaffner of Springs. She often said that much of her research was done in the Amagansett Library on Main Street, where she credited Carleton Kelsey, the librarian, with helping her with research. Although she stayed mostly in New York after a heart attack three years ago, she continued writing until her death.

Mrs. Rofheart, who was born on May 27, 1917, was the daughter of Evan Jones and the former Nureen Sorrel. Her husband, to whom she had been married for almost 40 years, her son, and one granddaughter are her only survivors. She was cremated.